

CHIP expansion measure is on a roll

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Well, that was quick.

Backers of Initiative 155, which would provide government-funded health coverage for as many as 30,000 uninsured Montana kids, say it will be on the November ballot because organizers already have collected more than enough signatures.

The ease with which I-155 qualified is an indication of its wide support. In fact, Gov. Brian Schweitzer already has instructed his budget director to assume the measure will pass and put its \$20 million cost into the next state budget.

I-155 would expand the Children's Health Insurance Plan, or CHIP, and Medicaid, to expand health coverage for low- and middle-income children. It would increase CHIP eligibility to 250 percent of the federal poverty level, up from 175 percent, as well as increase the Medicaid income ceiling and help pay for adding children to their eligible parents' private health insurance policies.

The measure would move Montana from having one of the worst percentages of uninsured children to one of the best such records in the country. And its price tag is somewhat misleading because the expanded program would draw as much as \$75 million a year in federal matching funds for health care. That money would go to health care providers, creating some \$7 million a year in additional state income tax revenue.

Despite the popularity of expanding health insurance for children, it never has been able to fly in the Legislature — largely because of lawmakers who have been trained to draw the line against anything that smacks to them of "socialized medicine." Never mind that expanding the children's health insurance programs has had the support of the state's two largest health insurers, Montana Blue Cross and Blue Shield and New West Health Services.

State Auditor John Morrison, who heads the I-155 effort, said its backers decided to go the initiative route to bypass the Legislature. That seems to have been an excellent idea.